

Staging Post-Colonialism(s)

For a Canadian, a walk through the streets of an Australian city can be a disorienting experience. The memories of empire linger in both countries, and it comes as a shock to find that Melbourne, with its streetcars, Victorian buildings and streets named after empire builders and their battles, is more familiar than Chicago.

This issue of *CTR* expresses the proposition that Canada and Australia are in fact more closely related than we commonly realize. Both are results of Victorian imperial state-making; both are built on stolen land; both have experienced crisis as traditional anglo-celtic constructions of nationhood have been challenged by cultural diversity. Both are officially "multicultural" but neither really knows what that means. And each envies the other. To many Canadians, Australia boasts a secure cultural identity and easy lifestyle (and great beaches); to many Australians, Canada seems to be a progressive country of great wealth and natural splendour that has worked through social issues Australians are now struggling to come to terms with. Ironically, Canada and Australia function as wishing mirrors for each other, reflecting back the idealized self.

The Australian contributions to this issue have been commissioned to examine aspects of Australian culture that will have particular resonance for Canadian readers. The recurring questions about "Australianness" and the "Australian identity" serve to remind us, in these post-referendum days, that the Canadian longing for a stabilized sense of nationhood is not an idiosyncratic "identity crisis" but rather a fundamental condition of post-colonialism. The elusive national identity ("Australianness" or "Canadianism") may in the end be little more than a perpetually renegotiated nostalgia for a sense of nation that may never be achieved because it was never more than a Victorian imperial fiction.

In her article on two plays that challenge traditional Canadian ideas of cultural identity, Joanne Tompkins makes the point that "identity as rehearsal, as provisional, is ... paradigmatic of hybrid cultures, which combine several cultures to create new entities, but not a specific, singular 'identity'." If post-colonial culture is a plural composite, what is the relationship between the political state and the hybrid cultures it contains? In

one way or another, all of the contributions to this issue attempt to answer this question.

Post-colonialism provides an analytic key that enables us to look at problems of nation and identity as more than historical accidents. But post-colonial analysis has proven useful in very different contexts: it can be applied (for example) to class and race relations in Jamaica; to gender politics in the United States; and to the production of English-language literature in India. Post-colonialism is a problematic formulation, in part because it reductively equates such very different historical experiences, and in part because it implies a state of emergence from colonialism, whereas in fact – as the articles in this issue so clearly show – post-colonial societies find themselves defined and often confused by intersecting and very present colonialisms. Clearly the meaning of the term has become so pluralized that it frequently suggests an undifferentiated colonialism as a universal mechanism of oppression and identity displacement. Hence our reference to post-colonialism(s), and our focus on questions of nationhood, inter-culturalism, and ethnicity.

This issue was made possible by Victor Emeljanow and his colleagues at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, to whom I wish to express my gratitude. Their work has shown me that a comparative study of Canadian and Australian theatre in the frame of post-colonialism can reveal much about both countries. It is our hope that this issue demonstrates the need for further comparative analysis. ♦

– Alan Filewod

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